

Examining Religious Identity through Literature: *The Chosen* by Chaim Potok

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This article will examine religious identity through the medium of literature, taking Chaim Potok's *The Chosen* as a case study. In order to contextualize this subject, the article will begin by briefly describing the relationship between religion and literature, after which it will discuss *The Chosen* and finish with the conclusion.

The relationship between literature and religion goes a long way back, in fact, it goes back to the dawn of literature, since man's first literary explorations were of a religious nature. One only has to read the Bhagavad Gita, the Yogi scriptures, the Norwegian legends, the Greek myths and of course the Old Testament or even Runic inscriptions to see how true this is. Literature was used for religious education and even Chaucer was of the opinion that "all that is written is written for our instruction"¹ thereby paraphrasing St. Paul, who had preached this message to Christians centuries earlier. Only gradually, literature separated itself from religion and came to be written because of various secular motives. However, this development has not been without its problems, literature has been viewed as replacing religious books such as the Bible, fulfilling a similar purpose, while at the same time, filling people's heads with fabrications from a non-divine source. Consequently, literature has become one of the flagships of secularism, testing God's truth with stories written by men. As steadfast faith in religion started to dwindle and science gained authority, the word 'God' itself became a term of poetry, as stated by Matthew Arnold in *Literature and Dogma*, which redressed the relationship between sacred and secular literature again. Truth claims of religious literature aside, when a poet or novelist attempts to write about religion, he or she stumbles upon the problem indicated by Arnold: God is not exact science, in fact, God is very difficult to understand or even perceive at all, never mind put into words. Arthur McCalla eloquently states that God is not a captive of human categories, for this reason, Hegel, Schelling and Hugo resorted to calling him the 'Absolute' or 'Infinite' as God is incommensurable with human knowledge. Language cannot bridge the gap between God and man, yet, it can describe, and through writing attempt to understand, individuals and communities utterly and completely devoted to God. Literature can open up, or at least allow us a glimpse into religious communities that are completely unfamiliar and inaccessible to most readers in a way non-fiction cannot.

One of the authors who has been able to do this well is Chaim Potok. His first novel, *The Chosen*, written when he was working on his doctorate in the early 1960's, captured the minds and hearts of both Jewish and non-Jewish readers alike. Not a major accomplishment one could argue, when looking at the success Bellow, Malamud and Roth enjoyed amongst a gentile audience, but Potok chose to write about

Orthodox and Hasidic Jewish communities, far removed from the secular worlds of his esteemed colleagues. In *The Chosen*, Potok fundamentally sketches the conflict between Orthodox and Hasidic Jews during the 1940's in America. The narrator, Reuven Malter, is an Orthodox Jew who forms an unlikely friendship with Daniel Saunders, the son of a Hasidic Tzaddik, the religious leader of a Hassidic community. In the first pages of the novel, "Potok re-orientates the reader so that she sees the world through Reuven's eyes, committed to Orthodox Judaism, but also committed to some level of participation in American life. This brings him into conflicts with other Jews, most significantly the Hasidic world of Danny and Rebbe Saunders."²

A quick digression is required to explain why these two denominations might be in conflict with each other. Orthodox Jews are of the conviction that they adhere to the Jewish practices and beliefs that existed from the time of Moses all the way through to the Rabbinic era up until the present day, without ever truly changing or adapting Judaism. Orthodox Jews came to define themselves as 'Orthodox' in reaction to the Age of Enlightenment or the *Haskalah*, the Jewish Enlightenment, in the eighteenth and nineteenth century, when certain groups of Jews, although respecting and observing the Jewish law wished to modernize and reform certain aspects of Judaism, in line with the spirit of the time, while 'Orthodox' Jews resisted this. Hasidism, on the other hand, is largely founded upon the teachings of the Ba'al Shem Tov, a mystic from eighteenth century Poland, who recognised God in nature and chose to study Him through Kabbalist texts, such as the Zohar, the writings of Isaac Luria and Chaim Vital, rather than Talmud. Through his practices and beliefs, the Besht reached out to the masses as he broke away from the intellectual and presumably difficult to comprehend tradition of an elitist group of scholars, yet at the same time, presenting those scholars with a type of mysticism they could accept³. Inevitably, there were conflicts with the Mitnagdim or ultra-orthodox Jews, almost from the beginning of Hasidism. Yet, the more time passed, the more Hasidism changed, institutionalised and in part because of their conflicts with the Mitnagdim⁴, Hasidic Jews returned to studying Talmud instead of Kabbalah. Hence, to the outsider, both Jewish denominations may appear quite similar, with the exception of how the respective members are dressed, but that is not the way Orthodox and Hasidic Jews see themselves, they truly believe they have distinct identities.

To those unaware of this conflict, *The Chosen* quickly makes

1. G.B Tennyson, Edward E. Ericson. "Introduction" in *Religion and Modern Literature*. Grand Rapids (MI): William B. Eerdmans P. C., 1975, 13.

2. Kathryn McClymond, "The Chosen: Defining American Judaism," *Shofar: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Jewish Studies* 25.2 (2007), 10.

3. S.A. Horodezky, *Leaders of Hassidism*, Trans. Maria Horodezky-Magasanik. London: Hasefer, 1928. 6.; Shmuel Ettinger "The Hasidic Movement – Reality and Ideals," in *Essential Papers on Hasidism*, Ed. David Hundert. New York, NYUP, 1991, 231.

4. See Mordecai L. Wilensky. "Hasidic-Mitnaggedic Polemics," in *Essential Papers on Hasidism*, Ed. David Hundert. New York, NYUP, 1991, 266.

it abundantly clear and through a typical American sport, baseball. In an effort to demonstrate to the gentile world that Orthodox and Hasidic teenagers are just as physically fit as any other American youngsters, yeshivas, Jewish religious schools, in New York decide to hold a baseball competition. The game does not indicate the difference between American gentiles and Jews, but between two different Jewish denominations. “In that baseball game you have two aspects of Jewish Orthodoxy in contention. You have the Eastern European aspect, which prefers to turn inward and not confront the outside world. You have the Western European more objective scientific aspect... that is not afraid to look at the outside world that produces scientists. These are in interaction with one another inside the core. That’s the baseball game.”⁵ On the one hand, we have the introvert, non-communicative Hasidic Jews who play in their full Hasidic attire, black suit, visible tzitzit⁶ and dangling earlocks, with a Yiddish-speaking Rabbi as their coach (who spends most of the game studying Torah) and on the other, the more Americanized Orthodox Jews, dressed as non-Jewish teenagers save for the skullcap, speaking English amongst each other and whose coach is a gym teacher at a public high school. All the players are wrapped up in the conflict inherent to the game of baseball and the conflict between their opposing denominations.

The animosity between the two groups, Danny’s and Reuven’s, is quickly felt, both parties shout abuse and mutual loathing reaches a peak when Danny hits Reuven in the eye with a baseball, which results in him having to be taken to the hospital to undergo extensive eye surgery. This tragic event is in fact what forms the basis of the friendship between Reuven and Danny, as Danny decides to come to the hospital to apologise for his actions and attempt to understand why he hated Reuven so much he wanted to kill him, which he actually says on page seventy, “I don’t understand why I wanted to kill you.”⁷ At first, Reuven is naturally none too pleased to see Danny, yet he quickly becomes intrigued by him, for a number of reasons. Daniel has to become the next Tzaddik succeeding his father, since it is an inherited position, although he prefers to become a psychologist. He also has a fondness for secular literature such as *Ivanhoe*, which, due to his absolute memory, he is able to recite by heart. Reuven’s father would like him to become a mathematician, whereas he wants to become a Rabbi, something Daniel cannot understand, since Danny is searching for more freedom and is hungry for secular knowledge. He reads Darwin, Huxley and Freud, even though he has to learn German in order to do so. This is how he meets Reuven’s father, David Malter, since he can only read safely in the library, the library where Reuven’s father, who is a yeshiva teacher, likes to read as well. Slowly but surely, Reuven, encouraged by his father, is taken into the Hasidic world and the reader is taken with him. Reuven’s father explains to him, and thus to the reader, the story of the Baalshem Tov and how Hasidic communities work. Reuven is taken to a Hasidic Shabbat service, which is how the reader is introduced to Hasidic religious services and certain more accessible forms of Kabbalah, such as gematriya,

5. Harold Ribalow, “A Conversation with Chaim Potok,” (in *Conversations with Chaim Potok*. Ed. Daniel Walden. University of Press of Mississippi. Jackson, 2001) 13.

6. Ritually knotted fringes attached to the four corners of the tallit katan (a garment that is a smaller version of the prayer shawl), which Hassidic Jewish men usually wear under their clothes.

7. Chaim Potok. *The Chosen*. (New York: Penguin Books, 1967, 190), 70.

which gives all Hebrew letters numbers, in order to add and subtract words from each other to uncover different layers of meaning in the Torah. Soon Reuven learns about another unusual aspect of Daniel’s world, his father has chosen to raise him in complete silence and will not talk to him unless they are studying Talmud, a mystery the reader is left to contemplate till the end of the novel. For three years, they are close friends, both diving deeper into each other’s worlds, discussing methods of studying Talmud (Reuven’s father is an advocate of using secular, text-critical approaches), discussing theories such as evolution, Freud and choosing to attend the same college, Hirsch College.

Then, World War II ends, the news of the concentration camps and the six million murdered Jews reaches America. Reuven’s father decides that people have waited long enough for the Messiah and becomes actively and publicly involved in Zionism. Danny’s father, however, tries to understand why God brought the Shoah upon the Jewish people and is opposed to forming a Jewish State without the Messiah. “How the world makes us suffer. It is the will of God. We must accept the will of God... God will build the land, not Ben Gurion and his goyim.”⁸ A secular Jewish state is an abomination in the eyes of Reb Saunders, a violation of Torah and he commences to fight against it with all his might. It should be clear by now that, as McClymond states, “the threats and temptations Danny and Reuven face do not [only] come from secular America but from crises *within* their “core communities”: the influx of textual critical methods into yeshivas, the worldwide devastation and theological challenges of the Holocaust, and the deeply passionate stances for and against Zionism.”⁹ In the end, it is the conflict about Zionism that temporarily severs the friendship, as evidently the son of a Zionist could not be friends with the son of an anti-Zionist and for two years, they do not speak.

When this conflict has mellowed down and they finally speak again, many things have changed, Daniel has decided not to become a Tzaddik, but to follow his heart, attend graduate school and become a psychologist. He knows this will pain his father and quite possibly jeopardize his position in the Hasidic community. It would also mean ending an arranged marriage which his father had set up for him – a Hasidic tradition. Reuven has made up his mind to become a Rabbi, despite his great talent for logic and mathematics and his critical method of studying Talmud, which got him into trouble at Hirsch College. “[Danny] shook his head. ‘I can’t get over you becoming a rabbi.’ ‘I can’t get over you becoming a psychologist.’ And we looked at each other in quiet wonder.”¹⁰ By that point, Danny has embraced his father’s way of raising him in silence, listening to it and learning from it in the manner of a Hasidic sage. Towards the end of the novel, the reader finally understands the reason for this strange method of child rearing. When Danny was very young, Reb Saunders had recognised the brilliant jewel that is his son’s mind and he was afraid it would dehumanise him and turn him away from Judaism. Hence, he raised Daniel in silence to teach him compassion, for his heart to stay close to God in secular America, where his great mind would go wandering. This interaction between father and son will come to shape Danny’s life and he admits that he himself may want to raise

8. Potok, 196.

9. McClymond 17.

10. Potok 257.

his own son this way, when the time comes.

In an interview, Chaim Potok makes the comparison between Reb Saunders and Daniel and God and the Jews, or in fact all religious people in the twentieth century. “There’s something going on that Danny doesn’t understand, and it’s the metaphor for precisely what it is that the religious person does in terms of his relationship to God in the twentieth century. Something is going on, and we don’t understand it. There’s a silence between the Jewish people, or indeed all religious people, and God in this century. But whatever it is - and I don’t understand it - the silence is not a break in communication. It’s a communication of a different kind, and what we try to do is tap into it and see what it’s all about.”¹¹ In the twentieth century, people seemed to turn away from God and God appeared to remain silent throughout some of the greatest crises of the last millennia, incomprehensible to a lot of religious people, but Potok offered an attempt to make it meaningful, at least to himself and his readers.

In the final pages of the novel, Reb Saunders accepts Danny’s decision not to succeed him, saying “Let my Daniel become a psychologist. I have no more fear now. All his life he will be a tzaddik. He will be a tzaddik for the world. And the world needs a tzaddik.”¹² Reb Saunders is certain that Danny’s identity will always remain that of a Tzaddik and he will be able to help, in whichever way, the interaction between God and his people. Saunders is right, although Danny shaves off his beard and earlocks, he knows and he promises his father he will always remain a Hasidic Jew, “an observer of the Commandments”, which the reader is able to witness in the sequel of *The Chosen*, *The Promise*. It is important to note that Danny and Reuven, despite of their struggles, never consider abandoning Judaism, rather they try to negotiate their Jewish identity within secular American society, in what Potok calls ‘core-to-core’ confrontations¹³.

A process Potok himself was acutely familiar with, since he had grown up in a Hasidic community which he chose to leave during his university years. According to his college roommate and lifelong friend Rabbi Gerald Wolpe, it was the most devastating crisis of his life.¹⁴ Yet, in the end it helped Chaim Potok become the excellent writer he is, for, as Philip Toynbee wrote, “few Jewish writers have emerged from so deep in the heart of orthodoxy; fewer still have been able to write about their emergence with such an unforced sympathy for both sides and every participant.”¹⁵ Potok did not forsake Judaism all together either, he chose to become a member of the conservative movement, a less orthodox form of Judaism, in which he remained until he died.

Chaim Potok shows us, his reader, Orthodox and Hasidic Judaism, two worlds which are different degrees of alien to gentiles and even secular Jews. He illustrates how religion both shapes identity and forms an obstacle to finding one’s individual identity within a closed and isolated group, which

is at odds with modern day society. However, the characters in *The Chosen* also demonstrate how to negotiate their religious identity within a secular society. Literature proved to be an excellent medium, giving the reader a moving and colourful account of the lives of these Jews and helping us understand their various problems in a way a sociological study would not have, while, at the same time, attesting that the relationship between literature and religion need not be so complicated after all.

11. Chaim Potok quoted in Elaine M. Kauvar “An Interview with Chaim Potok” (in *Contemporary Literature*, 27.3 (Autumn, 1986), 309).

12. Potok 277.

13. McClymond 19.

14. Leslie Field, “Chaim Potok and the Critics: Sampler from a Consistent Spectrum,” in *Studies in American Jewish Literature: The World of Chaim Potok*, no. 4 Ed. Daniel Walden (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1985), 3.

15. Philip Toynbee quoted in *Chaim Potok: A Critical Companion*. Ed. Sanford V. Sternlicht. Westport (CT): Greenwood P, 2000, 6.

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